All Ears with Abigail Disney
Episode 01: Terry McGovern
The Essential Female Workers of COVID-19
Air Date: April 30th, 2020

Abby: Hello?

Terry McGovern: Hello? Hello?

Abby: Hello? Hey Terry. I hear you now.

Terry McGovern: I can't hear anything.

Abby: She doesn't hear us.

Terry McGovern: It says external. It should say external microphone.

Terry McGovern: Hello? Can you hear me now?

Abby: Yay. This is so exciting.

I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears, my podcast, where I call up some of the amazing people who've been helping me think through inequality. I call them my super friends. We talk about the hot mess we've made of the economy, and how this pandemic might just be our chance to address the staggering problems Americans are facing. We have to start sometime, so why not now?

Today. I'm talking with my good friend, professor Terry McGovern. Hi Terry. How are you doing?

Terry McGovern: Good. Hi Abby.

Abby: This show is about inequality and on our very, very first show, our maiden voyage, if you will, we are starting by talking about women. Terry is a leading thinker in the field of women's rights, especially as it relates to public health.

She is the chair of the The Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University, and as a human rights lawyer, you and I first met in the early nineties in the midst of your ferocious advocacy for women, particularly women of color. And I remember hearing about you, Terry, before I met you because your praises were being sung at the New York Women's Foundation, which is where I was spending a lot of time as a volunteer.

And then I met you and you were like every girl I ever played softball with in high school. And then you told me about what you were doing. And I remember thinking like, God, she's like a gargantuan hero.

Terry McGovern: I actually just graduated from law school and wanted to be a poverty lawyer, and I happened to be in legal services, which is poverty law, just as the HIV epidemic hit. In the midst of the really horrible discrimination that was happening to gay white men

with HIV, a lot of the initial research was on them. And many of the early trials did not include women, did not include significant numbers of people of color. So we kind of from the outset, had all these signals about the epidemic: who was at risk, who needed to be tested, that were quite off, um, and there are all these women coming in. They were so sick, they were HIV positive. So we set out to figure out what was happening and we realized that the whole AIDS definition had been based on studies of men only. And uh, so we had to sue the federal government. We brought a class action.

Abby: Is, is my recollection accurate that when the decision came through that the number of AIDS cases have doubled?

Terry McGovern: Yes. Roughly. So we kind of from the outset, does this sound familiar? We had to fight every step of the way to get the true magnitude of the, of the epidemic acknowledged and to get people access to treatment and everything that was available for people with HIV.

Abby: So flash forward to COVID for me. Why, why would it be important to pay attention to women in this context?

Terry McGovern: I know we'll talk about women being the essential workers, women being healthcare providers, but, um, what many policymakers did immediately was think about how can we exploit this moment to restrict women's access to sexual and reproductive health services? So, um, what we saw was, okay, we have to put all our resources to COVID, so let's immediately start restricting access to abortion.

So we saw kind of a very quick exploitation of the moment on behalf of a lot of forces who've been kind of lying in wait to kind of tread on what I would call women's bodily autonomy.

Abby: Right, right, right. Now, Terry, one of the things that was, um, kind of amazing for me to learn from you so early on was that you were thinking about intersectionality long before anybody had a word for that phenomenon. Can you give me like a one sentence on what I mean when I say intersectional?

Terry McGovern: There's many, many intersecting factors that are happening. When we talk about a woman being affected by COVID, right? There's, there's gender, there's race, their socioeconomic status. So you know, this kind of concept that there's a person, there's a human body, and we look at how a disease hits it, and we look at it from one lens is totally ridiculous. Right?

Abby: Is this an intersectional moment, do you think?

Terry McGovern: Yes. I mean, look, we all know that everything about, uh, kind of, um, opportunistic virus is gonna interrelate to underlying health conditions.

So we know that for many communities of color, there are very severe health disparities. You know, it's very interesting because you can see in the neighborhoods in New York City specifically in Queens, in Brooklyn, in the Bronx, that have documented the most kind of

toxic waste facilities, and the highest rate of asthma, respiratory problems, somewhat high rates of cardiovascular disease, those are the same communities that are being ravaged by COVID.

This sadly was predictable. So it's of course access to care, but there are also the issues of underlying disease burden that has everything to do with intersecting inequalities, racism, socioeconomic inequalities, and then you put on top of that--that it's these same folks who are our essential workforce. Um, so I'm very sad to say I wasn't surprised at all to see the kind of disparities emerge in the data immediately.

Abby: This is also about the wellbeing of the health care workers themselves, isn't it?

Terry McGovern: Yes, absolutely. I mean, we know. I think globally, we know 70% of health care workers are women.

I think nurses in the U S the numbers are really even higher. Um, so immediately, uh, we had lots of issues that were kind of disproportionately affecting women. Um. Obviously the issue of, you know, not having adequate protections for healthcare workers, but also we know that women are often the primary childcare providers.

They're also often taking care of elderly, met family members. So, um, we saw crises immediately around these issues, these issues of care. Um, and when you're not protecting frontline healthcare workers, and you know that many of these are women who lots of other people are dependent upon, you're going to get into a lot of trouble very quickly.

Abby: You know, you said 70% of healthcare workers around the world, I think it's interesting, it's 78% of healthcare workers in this country are women, but 72% of the heads of organizations in public health are men.

So there's, so there's like, there's this gap. Between the women who are doing this and learning from, from proximity and intuition and all kinds of things that are not valued at the tops of organizations. Um, and then on the other hand, we talk about an essential worker. And the word essential is so interesting in this context given the pay structures.

And what's interesting to me is these essential jobs, as we call them, are all jobs of caring. You know, the actual physical and emotional and spiritual caring that we are outsourcing personally to other people. I wonder if you have a theory on why do the jobs of caring not have a financial and economic value in our society now, and aren't we learning anything from COVID about this?

Terry McGovern: Well, I mean, I wish I had, I mean, I think it's a whole bunch of intersecting -isms, frankly. Uh, racism, sexism, uh, you know, all kinds of, uh, for profit motives. There's, there's a lot going on. Um, but I would say that patriarchy has really enabled this kind of care situation where women are providing, you know, unpaid care all over the world where women are undervalued for doing the essential work in an epidemic that's killing a lot of people.

Um. You know, it's frankly patriarchy that has allowed this to persist. And you see the pushback when there's any efforts around changing these structures that would value this type of work. I'm very happy to go out on the fire escape and clap for the essential workers, but I've also seen many people comment, nevermind clapping, how about pay raises, pay equity, childcare, um, all the things that that would really mean, uh, appreciation, non-discrimination, et cetera. So I think, I think we are learning, but I still think we have a long way to go. We certainly should be learning that these male leaders who are insisting on being in charge of the response to the pandemic, in many cases, really don't know what they're talking about and are causing enormous damage.

Abby: Yeah, well, bleach being only the latest version of it.

Terry McGovern: But also being in a position of power where three, many months ago, um, if you were thinking you should have made sure the States had the equipment they needed, made sure that we were much more aggressive about, uh, about worrying about who was coming in with the virus.

I think in addition to everything else we need to rethink. We need to rethink leadership and use of power and how we work with this kind of power grab that goes on in the face of extreme circumstances.

Abby: Right, right. This is about the ample amounts of things that we've learned from various crises. About the way women are shortchanged and are overlooked for what they know, which is valuable.

So I want all the men to not freak out and run for the exits when they hear the word patriarchy. We're not talking about men when we talk about patriarchy. We're talking about the structure of the way it is. We're talking about a lot of men. We're talking about some women. Um, and we're talking about all of the ways in which we lose valuable information and feelings and lessons and learnings and wisdom and so forth.

So don't freak out at patriarchy, men!

Terry McGovern: Yep. When I used the term patriarchy, I include in patriarchy you know, kind the forcing of norms that are toxic for men and boys and punishment for those who don't abide by them. So to me, that term isn't about just oppression of women and girls.

Abby: So let's go back to my original question. Does gender have anything to do with inequality? Can, can you maybe give us a sentence why gender matters?

Terry McGovern: You keep asking me for these very complex things in a sentence.

Abby: Yeah, in a sentence! That's how smart I know you are.

Terry McGovern: Gender, gender, everything it --gender has, has to do with everything in this response in, in everything. Why does gender matter? It's an integral part of kind of how society responds to anything.

Abby: So I remember in the outbreak of the Ebola crisis, I was still very much in touch with the women from the film I made about Liberia, *Pray The Devil Back to Hell*. And these were women who had fought for peace and white tee shirts, and they were very proactive and very effective um, and when Ebola broke out, they took it upon themselves. They went out and they bought bleach and they bought mops and they bought buckets and they brought them home to their communities and they kept a few blocks safe. That was how they understood it. It was this grassroots effort, you know, from the very bottom where people were taking care of their own communities and they were incredibly successful at keeping the crisis at Bay.

And then a month and a half later, I'm sitting in a huge public health meeting, um, where they're talking about getting hospital beds and bringing the military in and all this stuff that they were doing. And I said, but, but, but I have, I can show you communities who've effectively kept it out. And I almost, I got laughed out of that room.

They thought it was adorable. Um, they thought it was funny for me to bring up the idea, and this is what's frustrating to me about when we talk about intersectionality, because very often the focus is on the ways in which people are of color, especially women of color, disproportionately affected by it, but they don't talk about how they're effective about it. Which is the, the, the point of talking from an intersectional lens is to talk about the strength of communities and learn from them.

Terry McGovern: You know, I think that, uh, what the, what you were just talking about with the women of Liberia, I mean, we have seen it was women in the HIV epidemic who really went out and said to other women, look at me. I have HIV. I'm, you're at risk. We're at risk. These gynecological symptoms you're having can mean you have HIV.

So I saw again and again in the HIV epidemic, women, whether they were women on, at the grassroots level or women doctors in hospitals, women actually knew what was happening, knew what to do, knew how to get things under control, and sadly, they often lacked the power to implement what they knew would work.

Now I do think we've traveled great distances. I'm happy to say that we have, you know, lots and lots of women in, in more positions of power. But what you see happen when this COVID crisis hits is it's kind of like these women who know how to respond in many contexts, just get kind of pushed aside. And you have, you know, just as you just described with that meeting about Liberia, you have the men come in and say, well, we really have the solutions.

Let's get the military. Let's you know, let's just get this thing under control and it's really infuriating. Um, and it, it, I think it costs a lot of lives. I mean, the great thing is there are women all over the world who have, who have responded to COVID and are sharing information. And figuring out ways to kind of contain the damage.

Um, but we ought to hear more from them and the women leaders who understand their efforts.

Abby: Yeah. So you mentioned domestic violence is something in particular that's a problem right now. Can you help me understand why that--one thing has nothing to do with the other, right? Why, why would DV be a problem?

Terry McGovern: So in -- we know traditionally in uh, in situations where there's quarantines that, uh, domestic violence rates really increase. And there's lots of factors, different studies point to the use of alcohol, economic stressors, the inability of women to, to escape, to, uh, to access their support networks. So we have sadly seen the numbers skyrocketed.

So when you think about women at home experiencing domestic violence, or sometimes boys and men as well, nowhere to run, nowhere to go. Uh, so it's, it's a huge problem. And of course, depending upon your immigration status, you're definitely not going to want to alert the authorities to a problem. And violence, we know so much about how to prevent it. But just like I was saying about the women leaders, a lot of the men who know how to do this, were also not really consulted. So, um, gender and people who understand it and people who are working to kind of change the more toxic aspects, uh, really need to be much more front and center in, in the responses.

Abby: So, would men be better off if we started with gender? I mean, is this just for us girls or do we have something to tell?

Terry McGovern: Of course men would be better off. I think it's better for everybody.

Abby: Terry, I've two questions I'm going to ask you. I want one word answers. So now we're not even on sentences. We want one word.

What's the first thing you're going to do if things, when things become normalized?

Terry McGovern: Travel. Yep.

Abby: What do you miss the most right now?

Terry McGovern: People.

Abby: A lot of people just immediately say people. Because we're all missing each other and we need to stop calling it social distancing. It's not social distancing. It's physical distancing because socially we need each other more than we ever have. I think. Terry, you're freaking brilliant. Thank you so much for all of your time. This has been great.

Terry McGovern: Thank you, Abby. Thank you for doing this.

Abby: So if you want to hear more from Terry McGovern as I always do, ou can find her on Twitter at, @TerryMMcGovern. So that's two M's in a row and you can find a book she just co-edited called *Women and Girls Rising: Progress and resistance around the world*.

All Ears is a production of Fork Films. Find us wherever you get your podcasts. Be sure to subscribe and spread the word. Thoughts, questions, feedback? You can reach us at podcast@forkfilms.com. And thanks to my All Ears team: Kathleen Hughes. Aideen Kane, Alexis Pancrazi, Christine Schomer, Kat Vecchio, Lauren Wimbush, and Sabrina Yates.

Our theme music was composed by Bob Golden. Thanks for listening.